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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the preliminary results of research currently underway concerning sex-based differences in written composition. Sixty themes written by college-age native speakers of English were chosen for study. The themes were typed exactly as they had been written. No corrections were made. They were numbered alphabetically by the names of their authors, but the names were not given on the themes. The 60 typed themes were turned over to a panel of 10 college English teachers who read each theme and tried to identify the sex of the writer. Out of the 600 decisions by the panel, 411 were correct. This is significant to a .999 level. The panel indicated reasons for their choices. These reasons were the basis for a formation of criteria for male and female themes. The criteria discussed in this paper are subject matter, word choice, metaphors, perspective, and tone. (Author)

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SHE WRITES LIKE A WOMAN

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SECOL XIV
November 1975

SHE WRITES LIKE A WOMAN

After listening to the papers read in the women's language section of SECOL last spring, I decided to investigate sex-based differences in the essays of some freshmen at Middle Tennessee State University. Rather than set up an artificial situation, I decided to use papers which had been written as part of the regular course work. They were written at different times in the spring semester in response to various assignments by several different teachers. For this reason they vary in length and purpose.

To establish some similarity in the orientations to subject of the writers, descriptive themes were chosen. Papers written by students who were not college age or who were not native speakers of English were eliminated since they would introduce variables with which I am not concerned. Other papers were eliminated because there were specific references to sex. One theme, for example, was entitled "My Favorite Place Is in My Boy Friend's Arms." Some other writers refused to sign a simple release form allowing me to use their themes. And those themes which were written under the direction of the teachers I intended to use in my research were also eliminated.

Sixty themes, 30 by female writers and 30 by males were typed exactly as they had appeared originally. No changes were made. They were numbered alphabetically and the identities of the writers kept separate. Copies of the 60 typed themes were then turned over to a panel of five female and five male English faculty members with a variety of experience with freshman themes.

Each panel member was asked to indicate on forms provided what that member thought to be the sex of each writer. There was no provision for "don't know" and the panel members were asked to make a wild guess if that were necessary. They were further asked to indicate the degree of confidence they had in each decision by marking each with a "C" to show a conscious decision based on something specific in the theme, or "I" for an intuitive decision, or "WG" if it were a wild guess.

On the first sheet of your handout, you will notice that two of the themes have been provided for you to read. I have chosen short themes for the sake of time, but many of the themes in the sample were two or three times longer. I am asking you to read these two themes and repeat this portion of the experiment by circling on the little answer sheet provided either "M" for male or "F" for female, and also indicate the degree of confidence in your choice by circling "C"--conscious, "I"--intuitive, or "WG"--wild guess.

The sheets will be collected and tallied in a minute or two. Please do that now.

SAMPLE THEMES TO BE DISCUSSED

Theme #1

Nashville

Nashville is a very beautiful place at night. I was eating dinner one night on the top floor of the Third National Bank. I went over to the window, and I couldn't believe what I saw. It looked as if we were being invaded by a mob of lightning bugs. It was just beautiful up there. I felt like I was in New York City looking out of the Empire State Building. Although I was just in Nashville looking out of a twenty-five story bank building. To me it felt like the biggest building in the world. I felt very important looking out over Nashville. I felt I was the ruler of the city and I could do what I wanted to with it.

Theme #17

My Bedroom Means alot to Me

My bedroom is the most treasured room in my house. In my room I can entertain my friends. I can solve some of my problems when I am alone in my room. The two-tone colors on the walls make me feel happy.

I enjoy bringing over my friends into my bedroom. There is plenty of space to dance when I turn my record player on. When I have a slumber party I never have to worry about the noise that we make because my bedroom is located at the end of the hall in the house.

When I am unhappy and I have problems at school or at home I can always go to my bedroom. I think clearly and not rational when I am alone in my room. Just being in my room eases some of the problems away.

The walls in my room are colored two tone. It makes me feel happy because the colors remind me of a breezy summer day.

As I said, 10 panel members each made 60 decisions, for a total of 600 decisions. Mere chance would have made approximately 50% or 300 correct decisions. The total score was 411 correct, approximately 68%. Computing a chi-square, we get 41.07, which at one degree of freedom, is greater than .999, or one chance in a thousand. Any statistician will agree that 411 correct out of 600 decisions indicates that there was something functioning in the mind of the panel which effectively identified the sex of the writers of most themes.

It is also statistically remarkable that there were certain panel members whose results were considerably above the degree of correctness for the panel as a whole. Four were above 70% correct, and one of those was 80% correct.

While 68% of the 600 decisions were correct, 77% of the themes were correctly identified by a majority of the panel. Twenty-five per cent of the themes were unanimously identified by the panel as by either male or female writers. However, two of those choices were unanimously incorrect, making the unanimous choices 87% correct.

Over half (312) of the panel's 600 choices were "conscious."

Seventy-four per cent of the "conscious" choices were correct. Less than one-third (185) of the panel's 600 choices were "intuitive"; 63% of those were correct. Little more than one-sixth (103) of the choices were "wild guess," and 60% of those were correct. We see, therefore, that when the panel consciously recognized reasons for their choices, they were more often correct; but we also see that the degree of correctness was greater than chance in even their "intuitive" and "wild guess" choices.

Theme #1 which you just read was written by a male and was so identified by 90% of the panel. How many of these people marked "M"? "45". For what percent? "82%". The confidence factor ascertained by assigning 3 to C, 2 to I, and 1 to WG was 2.67 for the correct members of the panel. What was it for those correct in this group? "Very high".

Theme #17, your second theme, was written by a female and was so indicated unanimously by the panel. How many of these people marked "F"? "52". For what percent? "94%". The confidence factor was 2.9 for the panel. What was it for those correct in this group? "Very high".

We can say, therefore, that you agree with the panel that the sex of the writers of these two themes is identifiable.

The statistics mentioned indicate that there is something other than chance operating in the minds of the panel members and in your minds. We will call this "something" the criteria on which you and the panel based decisions. How do we ascertain these criteria? We haven't time to poll your reasons, but the panel was asked to account for decisions wherever possible.

Before presenting the criteria, a few other comments must be made. First, the themes are samples of amateur writing. The criteria will therefore apply to amateur writing and not necessarily to yours, to mine, or to literature in general. Second, no one criterion can always correctly identify the sex of the writer. Individual themes may evidence conflicting criteria. Or, for reasons unknown to us, a small percentage

of themes contain criteria shown most often by members of the opposite sex. However, as indicated by our statistics, the criteria as a whole were unusually effective in making choices. Third, the panel was consistent in the application of their criteria. A look at the themes where the panel was unanimously correct shows that the criteria operate clearly. As the criteria are less apparent, vague or mixed, the panel becomes less correct. When the criteria present in a theme are identified with the sex not the writer's, the majority of the panel is wrong. This proves two things. One: the panel was consistent in applying their criteria; and, two: the cards were not stacked.

Since the students were free to choose the places they described, the places described in many of the themes may seem an indication of sex. You may think that only females write about bedrooms. But, of the 10 themes written about bedrooms, five were by males. And four of the five male bedroom papers were correctly identified. One of the female bedroom papers was incorrectly identified as male. Therefore, on the bedroom descriptions, the panel was 80% correct, even though the sex of the writers were evenly divided.

This is not to say that subject matter was not one of the criteria. It was. But it was more related to specific things within the place, or specific activities with which the writer was concerned.

Our example #17 shows dancing and a slumber party--both considered female. Other female themes discussed corsages and other memorabilia, soap operas, dreams, and shopping. Male papers mentioned tractors, athletic coaches, weight lifting devices, money, flying, and driving.

Another easily identifiable criterion is word choice. The following words usually indicated a female writer: secure, cozy, lovely, teensy-tiny, fluffy, dainty, love, home; and specific color words like: powder blue. Male writers' words were: hangout, joint, component stereo, and numerical and directional words. The function of word choice is often more subtle than a list of words could indicate. Males do mention colors--red, white, black, etc. But their use is usually denotative. Most males present colors as facts to be observed. In addition to being more discriminating or exact concerning colors--violet, crimson, etc.--females tend to use colors connotatively to express mood or attitude. For example, "The yellows, oranges, and greens which dominate my room always seem to cheer me up" (54), or "At night, small rays of golden light gleam from the cottages mystically across the beach, while the glowing silvery moon creates silhouettes on the moving water." Women use numbers, but more connotatively, like the eight-bedroom beachhouse used to connote wealth. Men used numbers denotatively to convey fact, "Around 14,000 people can be seated in Murphy Center" (8), or "The runway is 500 feet long." Distinguishing the denotative and connotative functions of words increased the effectiveness of this criterion of the panel.

Certain specific metaphors served to identify the sex of the writer. The power metaphor at the end of theme #1 marked that writer as a male. Another male describes a copy machine as sounding like a "1930 John Dee[re] Tractor." To a female, a house looks like a doll house, a path

like an ice cream cone, or, as in #17, a bedroom like a breezy spring day. But if we again look at the connotative and denotative functions of metaphors, we see more validity in this criterion. Look at the metaphors in #1. Lights from a tall building do look like lightning bugs. Looking out of a 25-story building is similar to looking out the Empire State Building. But do the two-tone colors of #17's room remind you of a breezy spring day, or is #17 using this metaphor to connote warmth and happiness? Or this, "Each time I return home my room seems to awake from a deep sleep. It is once again alive with the sights, sounds, and smells that make it so unique" (54). The awakening, coming alive, or, as she says elsewhere, the rebirth of her room is impressionistic. Here metaphor is used to enlarge rather than describe an actual situation--or perhaps to respond to it.

Which brings us to the most elusive but perhaps the most effective criterion, perspective and tone. Look again at #1. Even without the power metaphor, we have a strong, non-social, non-impressionistic, denotative description. Few people go to that particular restaurant alone, yet #1 mentions no one with him. On the other hand, #17 entertains friends. She looks at her room as a social place. She is emotional, happy, and even unhappy. Some of the female themes even admitted crying; #17 is impressionistic, connotative.

On the whole, papers written by males were more reserved, less apt to be emotional, not so likely to experiment with the language and with the association of ideas. They were more apt to have mechanical, mathematical, geographical, and utilitarian concerns. They tended to be

denotative--presenting facts. They were quite literal in their interpretation of the assignment. Their descriptions were generally realistic in the narrowest sense of the word. Often at the end of a paper by a male, a tag would appear asserting an attitude or value of the subject which was not sustained by the tone of the rest of the theme. These tags were assertions. For example, one theme ends: "Viewing a city at night from a plane is a beautiful experience. Beautiful views occur everytime I travel by an airplane. Everyone should view a city at night from a plane because it is a beautiful and worthwhile experience."

This male writer asserts that the scene is beautiful, but he does not convey a feeling of beauty through the use of connotative adjectives or by metaphorical allusion to things which are generally accepted as beautiful.

Papers by females, on the other hand, were more conversational, informal in the sense of warm and friendly. They presented social concerns, human needs, and values. They were concerned with aesthetics. They admitted being emotional and tried to evoke emotional responses. They experimented more with the language--piling up connotative adjectives and associating ideas for the sake of tone.

Compare the male assertion of beauty with this female conclusion (2): "The tall yellow cattails creep up above the rippled surface of the water while you ramble peacefully along your country path."

Upon finishing most of the themes written by males, the reader has a fairly clear picture of what the male is describing as we do in #1. Upon finishing many of the themes written by females, one often knows

little of what the place really looked like. For example, in #17, what are the colors? The reader of a female's paper often does not have a realistic picture of the place described, but does have a clearer perspective of the attitude or mood the female writer was trying to create.

In summary, the statistics concerning my research indicate that the sex of the writers of most freshman descriptive themes can be determined by persons familiar with freshman writers. Second, this determination is made by the application of certain criteria, some of which have been discussed. Finally, at this stage of my research, tone and perspective seem to be the most effective criteria.